

Genre

(Simplified from *A Glossary of Literary Terms*)

The basic idea

"Genre" is simply a French word meaning "type" or "category." When we say a book is "a mystery novel" or "a tragedy" or "a love poem," we are naming its genre.

The oldest and most important genre division

Since the time of Plato and Aristotle (ancient Greece), critics have divided all of literature into three enormous categories. The way to tell them apart is to ask: who is doing the talking?

I. Lyric: One single speaker talks the whole time. This is usually a poem. (Example: a poem where the speaker expresses their feelings about love, or nature, or loss.)

II. Epic or narrative: A narrator tells the story, but characters also get to speak (through dialogue). (Example: a novel, where the narrator describes events, but characters also talk to each other.)

III. Drama: Only the characters speak. There is no narrator explaining anything, you just watch (or read) the characters act and talk. (Example: a play.)

Inside these three big categories, there are many smaller, more specific genres. Some are very old: epic, tragedy, comedy, satire. Some were added more recently, over the last three centuries: biography, the essay, the novel.

How the idea of genre has changed over time

This part is important, because it shows you that genre isn't a fixed, eternal system, it's an idea that critics have argued about and changed for centuries.

I. Renaissance through the 1700s: genres as fixed types. During this period, critics thought of genres almost like biological species, fixed, with strict boundaries. You were not supposed to "mix" genres (for example, combining tragedy and comedy was considered a mistake). Critics wrote detailed rules for each genre: what subject matter was allowed, what structure it should have, even what emotional effect it should produce. Genres were also ranked, similar to how society itself was ranked into social classes at the time. Epic and tragedy sat at the very top of this ranking, because they dealt with serious, important people and events. Short lyric poems and pastoral poems (about idealized country life) were near the bottom, seen as "minor" forms.

Shakespeare actually made fun of this obsession with rigid categories. In *Hamlet*, the character Polonius announces a list of possible play-types to describe a group of visiting actors, and the list gets sillier and sillier: "tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral." Shakespeare is gently mocking critics who care more about labeling plays correctly than about whether the plays are actually good.

II. Late 1700s into the 1800s: the old system starts to break down. New kinds of writing began appearing that didn't fit the old fixed categories neatly, especially the novel, which was a genuinely new form. At the same time, poetry started changing in a different way: short, personal lyric poems became far more respected than before. This was connected to a bigger shift in how critics thought about what makes literature good. Increasingly, critics valued personal sincerity and intense feeling, rather than just following the "correct" rules for a genre. Because of this shift, the lyric actually replaced epic and tragedy as the genre thought to be the "highest" or most essentially poetic form, a complete reversal from a century earlier.

III. Mid-1900s: genre becomes unimportant (New Criticism). A group of critics called the "New Critics" believed every single poem was unique and should be studied entirely on its own terms, in close detail. Because of this intense focus on individual works, genre stopped mattering much to them. They weren't very interested in grouping poems together.

IV. After 1950: genre comes back, but with new theories behind it. Some critics, called the "Chicago School," went back to Aristotle's original approach. Instead of ranking genres, they grouped works by looking at how each work is structured to create a specific emotional effect on the audience.

Northrop Frye, an influential Canadian critic, proposed a fascinating theory in his book *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957): he said the four major genres, comedy, romance, tragedy, and satire, actually correspond to the four seasons of the year, and reflect deep, ancient patterns buried in human imagination (think of comedy as connected to spring, tragedy to autumn or winter, and so on).

Structuralist critics proposed a different idea: a genre, they said, is really a set of shared conventions, like an unspoken agreement, or contract, between the writer and the reader. These conventions change over time and across cultures, but they let both the writer and the reader understand what "kind" of experience they're creating or expecting.

Many critics today are skeptical that genres are "real" categories at all. They see them as useful but somewhat artificial ways of organizing literature for discussion. Some borrow an idea from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein called "family resemblance." Think about your own family: you might share your mother's eyes, but

your father's chin, and your sibling might share your father's eyes but a completely different chin. There's no single feature that everyone in the family shares, just overlapping similarities. Wittgenstein's idea is that genres work the same way: works in one genre share various overlapping features with some other works in that genre, but there's no single essential trait that every single member shares.